

**SUGGESTIONS FOR A TEXT
BOOK FOR STUDENTS
OF ENGLISH**

**FROM THE ADDRESSES
AND SPEECHES OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

**BY
JUDD STEWART**

**AN ADDRESS BEFORE
THE PARENT-TEACHERS ASSOCIATION
NORTH PLAINFIELD, NEW JERSEY
FEBRUARY 10, 1917**

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I might entertain you this evening with out-of-the-way incidents and anecdotes in the career of Abraham Lincoln. For example: When he was inaugurated there were five living ex-presidents, Van Buren, Pierce, Fillmore, Tyler and Buchanan. Three of these outlived Lincoln. One (Tyler) was a member of the Congress of the Confederate States until his death in 1862. One of them, Pierce, in March, 1861, wrote the others suggesting that they get together in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, to try and devise means to avert Civil War.

Although born after the death of the great president it has been my good fortune through following my hobby to meet and talk with a number of men who not only saw him but knew him rather intimately. Mr. Horace White, who reported the Lincoln and Douglas Debates, I numbered among my friends: with General Sickles, who left a leg at Gettysburg and General Wilson, who was a frequent guest at the White House during the Civil War, I have spent many pleasant hours. For several years I have had a pleasant acquaintance, through letters, with the only surviving member of President Lincoln's family, his son, Robt. T. Lincoln, but to relate anecdotes would be to simply entertain to no purpose. From these and various sources I might entertain you, but the opportunity to talk at so many school teachers happens very seldom to a layman and it is my first opportunity, and, therefore, I trust you will listen to me as I attempt to sketch out a plan for a text-book for use in teaching English in the schools,—English that is interesting, English that is plain and expressive,—English from the words of

Abraham Lincoln who was able to speak forcefully because he spoke from the heart.

The clearness of Lincoln's thinking, the purity and expressiveness of his English can be largely attributed to the fact that up to the time that he was a man and for many years thereafter he was not busied with many matters: the short time he was at school he had not to bother with class officers, plays, dances and all the fads that have been introduced into modern educational methods. His English after he became known was almost faultless, although he misspelled assuage in his celebrated letter to Mrs. Bixby and sometimes spelled conference with two r's as in the letter arranging for the Hampton Roads Peace Conference in January, 1865.

As a matter of fact, is it not true that as a means to success in life the frills now being put on educational methods are not only useless but harmful?

All but nine of the Presidents of the United States have been college men, but the really great presidents, Washington and Lincoln were among the nine who were not college men. Fortunately for him and for his memory Lincoln learned to think, to reason out for himself problems that confronted him in his every-day life and that really is the sum and substance of the best education.

Few people know that Princeton, Columbia and Knox College honored themselves by giving Lincoln the honorary degree of LL.D. The degree, however, was not in recognition of having passed any examinations or fulfilling requirements as to hours, credits, etc., on which great stress is laid in these days, not only at colleges, but unfortunately in high schools where the effect of a multiplicity of subjects is to give a

smattering of all and thoroughness in few, if any, subjects.

It was recently suggested to me by a lieutenant in the navy, a graduate of Annapolis, that in teaching English the writings and speeches of Lincoln would be a very proper text-book. This appeals to me most forcefully because all school children know who Lincoln was, know something of his Gettysburg Address, know him as the Emancipator of the Slaves and probably a majority of them admire him. Therefore, it seems to me that a text-book based upon, or rather made up from Lincoln's speeches and letters would be of great interest to the majority of children, and by having such a text-book they would learn History and good expressive English at the same time and in a most interesting way.

After discussing the matter with two of our school officials I have given considerable thought to the subject and have arrived at the conclusion that a few examples of Lincoln's English accompanied by explanatory notes could be made into a very instructive text-book.

Men become great only as they concentrate upon great tasks. From boyhood until he was almost fifty years of age Lincoln gave no signs of greatness: He was gentle, kind, charitable, liked by his neighbors, was so honest that he was called "Honest Abe" but gave no evidence of the true greatness of his soul and character until, in 1858, seven years before his death, he took a stand on the Slavery question.

Against the advice of his political advisers he delivered the address before the Republican State Convention, June 16th, 1858, beginning "If we could first know *where* we are and *whither* we are tending we could better judge *what* to do and *how* to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise

of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy that agitation has not only not ceased but has constantly augmented. In my opinion it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. *A house divided against itself cannot stand.* I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the union to be dissolved: I do not expect the house to fall, but I do expect it will cease to be divided.”

In his speech he stated in simplest words and clearest language the whole substance of the Slavery question, the agitation and consequent division of the country. While it was a political speech to a political convention it lifted the whole subject above petty party politics to a moral plane and placed it upon a higher level, the life of the government, the welfare of the whole people.

In this speech he threw down the gauntlet to Senator Douglas and took a bold stand, putting his soul into the task of settling the slavery agitation and this is the first great Lincolnesque speech.

On July 10th, twenty-four days later, he spoke in Chicago in answer to an address of Douglas: On the 17th again answering Douglas at Springfield: then came the arrangement for the joint debates with Douglas, the first debate being at Ottawa, August 21st, the last at Alton, October 15th, 1858.

In their first debate each disclosed his principles and the following debates simply elaborated in details the framework laid down at Ottawa.

The Springfield speech may be called the starting point of Lincoln's national career. The Lincoln-Douglas debates gave him a national reputation and nowhere in history is there a parallel to these political discussions. These debates

came about largely through Douglas quoting from and misinterpreting Lincoln's House Divided Against Itself Speech.

There were seven joint debates, each occupying three hours; one hour for the opening speech, an hour and a half for the reply and then half an hour for the closing. In the first debate Douglas had the opening hour and Lincoln in his hour and a half answer after some preliminary remarks read from a speech he had delivered in 1854, in which he had said:

"I have no prejudice against the southern people: they are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses north and south. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference I as well as Judge Douglas am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position. Notwithstanding all this there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects, certainly not in color; perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment, but in the right to eat the bread without the leave of anybody else which his own hand earns he *is* my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas and the equal of every living man." This defined his position on the Slavery question.

Following the Springfield Speech and this first debate

should come the Cooper Institute Speech, February 27th, 1860. Although he had been a member of Congress in 1848, here for the first time he addressed an eastern audience and on a subject in which his soul was enlisted. It is one of the most important addresses ever delivered in the United States for it unquestionably changed the course of History. Prior to this speech the east looked upon Lincoln as a stump speaker of ability, but after this speech (after Judge Nott, who died last year, and Cephas Brainard, who died in 1910, as representatives of the Young Men's Republican Club had checked up the statements made in this speech) Lincoln ranked not only as one of the best informed men on the subject of the Constitution, but as a statesman peculiarly fitted to deal with the question of slavery. This speech reviews or rather gives the views of the framers of the Constitution on the Slavery question as no one before or since has done. In the Preface to the pamphlet containing this speech Nott and Brainard said: "A single easy simple sentence of plain Anglo-Saxon words contains a chapter of history that in some instances has taken days of labor to verify and which must have cost the author months of investigation to acquire * * * * . Commencing with this address as a political pamphlet the reader will leave it as an historical work—brief, complete, profound, impartial, truthful—which will survive the time and the occasion that called it forth and be esteemed hereafter no less for its intrinsic worth than its unpretending modesty."

He took as his text a quotation from Senator Douglas' speech at Columbus, Ohio:

"Our fathers when they framed the government under which we live understood this question (the Slavery question)

just as well and even better than we do now." Lincoln adopted this as a text because it furnished "a precise and an agreed starting point for a discussion." He defined the frame of the government as "The Constitution" and the fathers as "The Thirty-Nine Men who signed the Original Document" and then he analyzed in masterly fashion what they said and did with regard to Slavery, interpreted the Constitution in its relation to slavery and in the end said "Let us have faith that right makes might and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it."

After this speech, which made him President, (although hardly known in the east, four months before the nomination) I would place the first inaugural in which the obligation and duty of the president is so beautifully set forth together with his plea for the union:

"I am loath to close, we are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over the broad land will yet swell the chorus of the union when again touched as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature."

His first message to Congress, July 4th, 1861, is not only an example of English, but contains a description of the state of the country and a most forceful exposition of the fallacy of states rights or state sovereignty.

January 1st, 1863, his Emancipation Proclamation as *President* but by virtue of the power invested in the *Commander-in-Chief* of the army and navy—a document that freed the slaves that ranks as high as any human document:

Let these, followed by the Gettysburg Address of Novem-

ber 19, 1863, the letter to Mrs. Bixby, November 21st, 1864, and the second inaugural, March 4th, 1865, complete a text-book which ought to interest pupils not only by the clear, expressive English used but by reason of the historical interest it would arouse.

Many people know that in the Gettysburg Address he used the phrase "Government of the people, by the people and for the people"—but how many know that this beautiful finished expression was foreshadowed in his first message to Congress, July 4th, 1861, when he referred to a "Constitutional Republic or Democracy—a government of the people, by the same people."

The injustice of the principle of slavery and the honesty of purpose in waging war was never more clearly expressed than in the second inaugural—"fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away: yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the Bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still must it be said—"The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether: with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan—to do all which may acheive and cherish a just and lasting place among ourselves and with all nations." The suggested text-book, therefore, would consist of: The House Divided Against Itself Speech, in 1858; The First Debate with Douglasspeech in 1858; The

Cooper Institute Speech, 1860; The First Inaugural, 1861; The First Message to Congress, 1861; The Emancipation Proclamation, 1863; The Gettysburg Address, 1863; The Letter to Mrs. Bixby, 1864; The Second Inaugural, 1865.

Lincoln spent 49 years of his life in preparation, six years in the accomplishment of his work. The study of his life is commended and commends itself to all thinking people.

Here in this new world country with no pride of ancestry arose the greatest man since the meek and lowly Nazarene; a man whose life had a greater influence on the human race than any teacher, thinker or toiler since the beginning of the Christian Era.

Why should we not teach his thoughts, his modes of speech, his simplicity of expression to those who with their children and descendants for ages will remember—Abraham Lincoln, the Emancipator, the Martyr, the Greatest American?

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